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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 002037

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIANS OVERWHELMINGLY APPROVE NATIONAL
REFERENDUM ON PRESIDENT BOUTEFLIKA'S PROPOSAL FOR NATIONAL

RECONCILIATION

REF: A. ALGIERS 1973

[B](#). ALGIERS 1810

[C](#). ALGIERS 1702

[D](#). ALGIERS 1661

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) According to the Ministry of Interior, about 97 percent of Algerians who voted September 29 approved President Bouteflika's proposal for national reconciliation. Of eligible voters, nearly 80 percent officially went to the polls nationwide. While officials and citizens alike took for granted the measure would pass, many Algerians were cynical about the results, complaining in particular that the Government's official participation figures were too high to be credible, especially in Algiers where abstention is traditionally high and anecdotal evidence suggests voting was not heavy. The two major questions ahead: 1) What will be the content of the implementing legislation? 2) Will terrorists, as intended, lay down their arms? The suspected manipulation of the election figures, if true, will not have much practical affect on the course of events. However, it will tarnish the moral and political legitimacy of the outcome, which in any case would almost certainly have produced a substantial pro-charter majority. And it underscores that Algeria still has a ways to go before its democracy rhetoric is translated fully into reality. (End Summary.)

VOTERS OVERWHELMINGLY APPROVE BOUTEFLIKA'S PROPOSAL

2. (U) With a "yes" vote of 97.38 percent, Algeria's voters September 29 approved President Bouteflika's proposal for national reconciliation. The Ministry of Interior, responsible for counting the votes, said voter turnout and support for the proposal were highest in the seven wilaya (provinces) most affected by terrorism in the 1990s: Laghouat, Khenchela, Batna, Tebessa, Tiaret, Tlemcen, and Djelfa. In these seven areas, voter participation reportedly exceeded 89 percent, and the measure passed with at least 97 percent of the vote. Overall, 14,054,164 Algerians voted for the referendum, with 381,127 voting against it. The national participation rate was 79.76 percent. In Algiers, the capital and largest urban area, the measure passed with 94.73 percent of the vote. Participation in Algiers was recorded at 71.87 percent. Asked at a press conference how these high turnout rates squared with the observed lack of lines and crowds at polling stations, Interior Minister Zerhouni said that the press had missed a lot of voters, who turned out in especially heavy numbers late in the day.

VOTE BOYCOTTED IN BERBER AREAS

3. (U) Although the proposal passed overwhelmingly in every single wilaya, in the Berber-dominated wilayas of Bejaia and Tizi-Ouzou the poll was largely boycotted. According to official figures, the rate of voter participation in Tizi-Ouzou was a mere 11.51 percent, according to the official GOA count. In Bejaia, the officially announced rate was 11.53 percent. In Bejaia, 94.36 percent of those who voted supported the national reconciliation proposal. In Tizi-Ouzou, 95.94 percent of voters supported the measure.

REACTION TO THE VOTE MIXED

4. (C) PM Ouyahia publicly welcomed the vote, noting the Charter would provide a "roadmap" for the government's handling of problems arising from the period of terrorism. The presidential coalition parties -- the FLN, RND, and moderate Islamic MSP party -- also issued predictably laudatory declarations. Parties and groups that opposed the Charter publicly accused the government of perpetrating fraud. Numerous Algerian contacts as well as long-time African and Maghrebian diplomatic observers voiced private skepticism about the tabulation of high voter participation, especially in Algiers, known for its traditionally high

abstention rates. Arouch Berber movement leader Abrika publicly expressed astonishment over the claimed voting rate in Algiers. Meanwhile, reaction from terrorists was divided, suggesting that the charter may indeed prompt defections. The GSPC issued a communique rejecting the referendum results and vowing to continue terrorist actions until Algeria became an Islamic state. On the other hand, Hassan Hattab, a founding member of the GSPC, was reported as announcing his plans to surrender to GOA authorities. The press also reported that 20 other terrorists said they would lay down their arms, and Interior Minister Zerhouni said October 2 that a regional emir (terrorist leader) had surrendered following the September 29 referendum.

NEXT STEPS

15. (SBU) The Ministry of Interior announced that the Government without delay would begin working on the implementing legislation, the details of which remain "top secret." Presidential Diplomatic Advisor Rahal told

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Ambassador Oct. 2 that a Council of Ministers meeting this week would establish a working committee to determine what legislative steps would be required. The Arabic-language El Yaom predicted that a cabinet shuffle would soon be in the offing, with FLN Party Leader and Minister of State Belkhadem likely to replace Ouyahia as Prime Minister. Embassy sources also predict that President Bouteflika may next year propose amending the constitution to enable him to seek a third consecutive presidential term. Our contacts expect Bouteflika to argue that he is best positioned to oversee the national reconciliation process, which would extend beyond his current term.

COMMENT: TOO MANY VOTES

16. (C) While we do not doubt that the measure passed overwhelmingly, we concur with members of the opposition that it is difficult to reconcile claimed voter participation rates, especially in large urban areas like Algiers, with the absence of crowds, lines, or other visible indications of high voter turnout at polling stations. Embassy employees who voted maintained that voter turnout could not have reached anywhere close to 72 percent in Algiers. One employee who voted at the end of the day said very few names had been marked off from the official list. Another employee who voted late afternoon said one of the poll workers, a personal friend, told him that only 70 out of 600 registered voters had reported to that polling place. Two respected journalists who spoke with the Embassy on condition of anonymity also complained that the officially reported turnout rates were too high, especially in Algiers.

17. (C) The suspected manipulation of official voting figures, if true, will probably have very little practical impact on the course of events. It will, however, undercut the moral and political legitimacy of the outcome, which in any case would have been a sizable pro-charter referendum majority, given terrorism fatigue and the genuine longing of most Algerians for peace and reconciliation and their readiness to follow Bouteflika's lead. Such manipulation also underscores that Algeria has a long road ahead to real democracy.

ERDMAN